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**Work and life balance practices in Bhutan**

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## **Work and life balance practices in Bhutan**

### **ABSTRACT**

*This research examined formal and informal human resource policies and practices that support work life balance (WLB) in Bhutanese Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Developing countries like Bhutan where small and medium enterprises (SMEs) make up the majority of all enterprises are less likely to encompass formal comprehensive WLB policies that more privileged societies like the US, Canada, Australia, and the UK where the concept of WLB began. Interviews were conducted with 20 employees and 10 employers from 10 SMEs in Bhutan. Results showed that informal practices were the predominant mechanism for employees to manage the multiple roles in their lives. Strong norms of trust between employers and employees supported these informal practices.*

Keywords: work/life balance; work and family; HRM; HR policies

### **PAPER TEXT**

The purpose of this research is to explore the current formal and informal human resource policies and practices that support work life balance in Bhutanese Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). A growing area of societal concern across the globe pertains to family-responsive employment policies and practices that are designed to improve individuals' ability to effectively carry out work and family demands over the career span (Kamerman, 2005). Work life balance (WLB) policies and practices are adopted by employers and governments to help employees jointly manage work and non-work roles; enable successful participation in labor market activity, family and personal life; and enhance quality of life (Kossek, Lewis & Hammer, 2010). These policies facilitate employees' involvement in care giving for children, elders, or other family members; and many non-work pursuits such as education, volunteering, leisure, and self-care (health, exercise) (Ollier-Malaterre, 2009; Ryan & Kossek, 2008). Common formal policies include flexible work arrangements providing control over the time, timing, continuity, and amount of work; direct dependent care supports such as child and elder care services and employee assistance plans; and information and social support for managing work-family stress and health (Kossek & Freide, 2006).

A number of studies (eg. Verma, Chang, Kim & Rainboth, 2009; Straub, 2007) have shown that formal WLB arrangements contains only some of the possibilities open to employees seeking to

balance their work with their family needs. Informal WLB practices typically manifest themselves as verbal agreement between colleagues, employers/supervisors and employees. Informal WLB practices appear to be based on a mutual obligation between employers and employees and dependent on a degree of reciprocity.

Cooke & Jing (2009) argue that implementing work-life balance policy provides benefits to both employees and organisations. For employees, the policies are expected to assist them to manage and balance their work and personal lives. In addition, WLB relates to reduction of personal stress from work-family conflict and improvement, indirectly, of mental health and physical health, more positive work experiences and more satisfying job outcomes.

Developing countries like Bhutan where small and medium enterprises (SMEs) make up the majority of all enterprises are less likely to encompass formal comprehensive WLB policies. Further, the concept of WLB has emerged from societies like the US, Canada, Australia, and the UK where they have more resources and other supports for such policies. In contrast, developing economies may not have such luxury to frame and implement formal policies which sometimes can be too expensive for the enterprises. Therefore, it is expected in SMEs that there will be more informal than formal practices as SMEs generally have flatter management structures and less bureaucracy.

Bhutan's development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) (aimed at bringing happiness and wellbeing to citizens) might influence the formalization of WLB policies and practices within Bhutanese enterprises. For example, one of the domains of GNH recognizes that balance between paid work, unpaid work and leisure are important for one's well-being. Further, it states that a flexible working life is vital for the wellbeing of individual workers and their families and communities (Ura, Alkire, Zangmo & Wangdi, 2012). As there is an absence of previous studies looking at WLB in Bhutan, the purpose of this study is to investigate how formalised the WLB policies and practices among Bhutanese enterprises are and the preferences of the employees with regard to these.

## **METHOD**

A qualitative method is adopted for this study to investigate the employees' and employers' perception and experiences concerning work life balance initiatives and usage. This research proposal was approved by the authors' University Human Research Ethics Committee.

### **Sampling Strategy**

The data base maintained by the Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI) was used to identify the potential organisations to approach. A simple random sampling strategy was employed to select 52 SMEs (4 – 99 employees), 30 from Thimphu and 22 from the Phuentsholing region. Out of 52 requests, 47 organisations (25 from Thimphu and 22 from Phuentsholing) showed their willingness to participate. Another simple random sampling strategy was employed to reach the final sample which includes 6 from Thimphu and 4 from Phuentsholing making a total of 10 SMEs. Two separate lists (one each of male and female employees) were compiled of all potential participants meeting the criteria of having worked in the company for more than 2 years and between 25 and 59 years of age. Participant selection was then done by selecting every 3<sup>rd</sup> employee from both lists.

All the selected participants were contacted by phone to make an appointment for the interview. When the selected participant was not available, the next employee in the list was contacted after reviewing his/her eligibility. Further, one employer/HR manager was selected from each company.

### **Sample**

Two employees from each organisation (12 male and 8 female) constitutes the total number of respondents representing the employees' perspective. The average age of the male respondents was 33 years and 32 years for women. Their average working experience in the same organisation ranges from 5 years for male and 7 years for women. Over 75% of the total employee participants are married. Seven employers and 3 HR managers represented the employers' views. Of the 7 employers, 6 were male and 1 was female. The average age of the male respondents was 40 years, while female employer was 31 years old at the time of the interview. The average age of the female HR managers was 35 years old whereas the male HR manager was 38 years old at the time of the interview.

## Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data for this study. Participants' responses were recorded on an individual checklist by the researcher. Practically, it was possible to make only brief notes during the interview session. Therefore, recording of key words and phrases was used to capture the responses of the participants. The most relevant comments for this study are presented below (indented and italicized). Those comments do not necessary represent word-for-word comments of the respondents but are very close to the researcher's note taking.

## Data analysis

Analysis of the interview data was conducted using a categorization matrix. This matrix facilitates the identification of common themes. The analysis of the employees' interview began by inserting distinct headings adapted from Maxwell (2005) in each column in the categorization matrix (see Figure 1). All the responses from the eight interview questions was assembled and then placed under the corresponding heading. Each list under every heading was examined for terms, phrases and concepts that were repeated, revealing distinct themes within each category. A similar approach was adopted to analyse the employers' interview data. The additional headings created in the categorization matrix from the employees' responses were *initiative* (initiating WLB practices and policies) and *support* (for work life balance). WLB policies are intended to support employees in combining paid work and personal life. They can take the form of statutory provisions, may be part of a collective agreement, or may be formal or informal arrangements within individual organisations.

Domains	Sub Domains
Flexible work arrangement	Flexible work hours
	Part time
	Teleworking
	Co-workers support
Leave	Maternity and paternity leave
	Family reasons
Child care arrangement	On-site
	Off-site
Supportive arrangement	Employee counselling
	WLB management training
	Dissemination of information

Figure 1. Domains and sub-domains of work life balance (adapted from Maxwell, 2005).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined the current formal and informal human resource policies and practices that support work life balance in Bhutanese Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). In particular, the study sought to examine which domains of work life balance embraces formal/informal policy & practices. According to Beauregard & Henry (2009), flexible work arrangements, family leave programs, childcare arrangement and supportive arrangements are some of the prominent domains of work life balance which enhance work life balance of an individual. The overall finding from this study suggests that work life balance policy and practices are mainly based on mutual trust and confidence between the employers and the employees. In summary, there appear to be few 'formal' policies and practices, but many 'informal' practices that appear to result in people experiencing good work and life balance.

### **Flexible work arrangements**

Flexible work arrangements are one of the key domains in securing work life balance (Marlow, Taylor, & Thompson, 2010). However, it is important to recognize that flexibility embraces not only a number of formal arrangements, but also informal arrangements. There were a number of approaches to flexible working arrangements visible within Bhutanese SMEs which are predominantly informal. The findings suggest that employers/ HR managers are prepared to accommodate requests for flexibility on condition that the absence could be covered internally, without imposing extra costs on the organisation. Flexibility for employees usually related to being permitted to start work late or finish work early (often in order to reach and collect children at school or similar).

*In certain circumstances, where I need to attend teacher – parents meeting in the school, attend to a sick family member etc. I inform my manager in advance about my late reporting to the office which is normally being accepted [Employee: Participant 16, F 27, S].*

Resistance to initiate or allow flexibility occurs when the person does not believe that the particular type of flexibility has a role to play. Flexibility relating to part time and teleworking were the two areas where both employers and employees exhibited their resistance. According to the findings, part time and teleworking are concepts of work culture which are rarely practiced by the employees of SMEs in Bhutan

### ***Flexible working hours***

Flexible working hour arrangements may take different forms that cover the way the working hours are organized during the day, week or month. In the present context, flexible working hours are working hours which may be varied by individual employees in accordance with their own or their family's need, thereby enabling employees (albeit to a varying extent) to fulfil certain fundamental care needs within the family. Flexible working hours are determined mostly through informal arrangements between the employers and the employees within Bhutanese SMEs. Such informal practices are found to be far more common in small organisations with small number of employees (Marlow, Taylor & Thompson, 2010).

The elements that the respondents placed the most value on when it came to the organisational culture was for the work environment to be friendly and relaxed and built upon mutual trust & confidence, respect and reasonable expectations. Therefore, they placed high value on the supportiveness and respect of the informal context of an organisation. A number of respondents mentioned that their employers explicitly created an atmosphere of trust but expected their trust to be rewarded. Through themselves trusting their employees they expect the same kind of behaviour in return. The respondents agreed that they feel more comfortable and secure with their work arrangement when the work environment and culture supports flexibility.

*There are no rules explaining the conditions of requesting work flexibility. I hope whatever reasons they provide are genuine and true. It all depends how much we trust each other [Employer: Participant 2, M 24, P & M].*

When mutual trust and respect are achieved the employer-employee relationship is taken closer to Reilly's (2001) definition of mutual flexibility, where the needs of both employer and employee are considered in a mutual way and trust is considered a necessary prerequisite. Many respondents described their relationship with their supervisor as somewhat similar to Reilly's definition of mutual flexibility. As such they valued being trusted each other, that expectations and goals were clear and that their wellbeing was cared for through respect of their personal obligations. The findings from this study also suggest that an informal flexible working practice is one of the predominantly practiced domains of work life balance within Bhutanese SMEs.



### ***Part-time***

Part-time work is usually defined as regular wage employment in which the hours of work are less than “normal” (Thurman & Trah, 1990). The findings from the present study suggest that there is very little demand either from employers or employees for part time employment within Bhutanese SMEs. Bhutanese SMEs are still in the infant stage which does not demand a range of human resources apart from a small number of fulltime employees (Moktan, 2014). The growth in part-time employment in the United States and other developed countries appears to have been due to the expansion of industries, introduction of cutting edge technology and availability of diverse work force (Sightler & Adams, 1999). Bhutanese employers remain uncertain of offering part time work which could be due to a lack of awareness of the potential benefits. However, a bigger reason probably lies with the fact that flexible work arrangements deeply challenge the traditional way of working and the basic assumptions of how work should be done. Introducing part time work may increase the administrative workload to the organisation, (for example hiring two part-timers for each full-time job would mean that the organisation has to maintain and process two sets of personnel records). Higher overheads may also be incurred as a result of having two persons in one position. Certain jobs may need to be re-designed to make part-time work feasible and this would incur additional costs, which is very unlikely to be introduced by the small enterprises. In addition, the findings suggest that a lack of formal policy with respect to part time employment may have discouraged the initiation and use of part time work. Sandor (2011) and Plantenga & Remery (2009) have found that employees tend to show unwillingness to voluntarily take part time employment in the absence of formal policy which does not ensure equal treatment through the same protections as full-time.

### ***Teleworking***

Teleworking is defined broadly as working from anywhere at any time (Kurland & Bailey, 1999), or performing one’s work duties at a remote location. The term telework is used interchangeably with telecommuting and virtual work (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Siha & Monore, 2006). As a practice, it is becoming increasingly common internationally (Davis & Polonko, 2003). However, the finding from the Bhutanese SMEs reports a different scenario, where the teleworking as the part of a flexible work arrangement has never been practiced to support balancing work and life. The traditional onsite

work culture still dominates over distributed forms of working suggesting face-to-face interaction with co-workers, supervisors and clients is an integral part of Bhutanese social system. Such hesitation in the context of Bhutanese SMEs could also be due to underdeveloped information and communication technology and poor internet services.

### ***Co-workers support***

In the work and family literature, co-worker support is usually viewed as an emotional coping construct (Thompson, Kirk, & Brown, 2005; Thompson & Cavallaro, 2006; Thompson & Prottas, 2005). A negative relationship has generally been found between coworker support and work interfering with family (Carlson & Perrewe, 1999; van Daalen et al., 2006; Thompson & Prottas, 2005). Analysis of the interview data of the employees in the present study suggest that supporting each other on regular basis is embedded in the work culture.

Co-workers support can possibly provide unique advantages that other types of support, such as formal leave cannot. For instance, co-workers can provide immediate support to fellow colleagues when the need arises. Analysis of the data revealed that picking up a shift was one prominent co-worker support behaviour being practiced by the employees.

*Supporting each other is a very common in our office. Whenever I have to leave the office due to some emergency, my colleagues would not mind to fill my absence. In return, I also reciprocate in helping them whenever needed. I think we have built that much of trust in each other. [Employee: participant 9,F28,S]*

### **Leave**

Findings from this study suggest that employees are allowed to be absent from work in order to handle domestic or personal needs. This absence ranges from a few minutes (e.g., intermittent leave), or hours, off during the work day to several weeks, months, or longer. As compared to other work life balance domains, the leave domain is more formalised in terms of policy and practices. However, an informal practice of allowing leave continues to operate within the formal policy to a large extent. Employees are entitled to various types of leave such as maternity & paternity leave and family reasons (casual, bereavement, sick and extra ordinary leave) which are either paid or unpaid leave. They are usually in formal policy within the organisation. Although it is expected that leave is

regulated in accordance to policy, in reality the findings reveal that employers and employees negotiate with each other based on informal relationships to reach to common agreement about leave practices. Therefore, informal practices in regulating the leave process seem to be rooted within the formal leave policy of Bhutanese SMEs.

### **Childcare arrangements**

Finding appropriate childcare for children while parents are at work is a problem faced by working parents around the world (Hein & Cassirer, 2010). Access to childcare is sometimes thought to be an issue mainly in industrialised countries, but parents in developing countries are facing similar problems as family structures change and more women join the labour market either through choice or necessity (Kiger, 2011). Formal off-site and on-site child care facilities for working parents of SMEs are relatively non-existent in Bhutan. The introduction and development of work life balance practices such as workplace childcare and nurseries might not be implemented by the SMEs due to the high perceived costs (Dex & Scheibl, 2001). This finding is directly in line with resource-based theories predictions under the heading of expected efficiency gains. Small organisations are predicted to be less likely to offer costly benefits to employees since their resources will not support these costs nor will there be administrative systems in place to support them, as noted in other SME studies (Bacon, Ackers, Storey & Coates, 1996). No formal policy exists regarding the provision of childcare facilities and services.

*I don't really worry about child care centre. I have made an arrangement along with some of my colleagues. Knowing that my child is in safe hand enables me to stay focused at work. My manager allows me to take time off in between to go and breastfeed my child  
[Employee: Participant 12, F33, S].*

According to the findings, families (parents, grandparents, aunts and siblings) are the main providers of child care for the working parents. Such opportunity still tends to exist and is driven by a strong Bhutanese custom of joint family systems. Assistance from the family members is the most widespread arrangement being used, followed by employing a baby sitter/nanny in a few cases.

### **Supportive arrangements**

Employers or supervisors play an important role in the effectiveness of WLB programs because they may encourage employees to participate or discourage employees from participating WLB programs (Milliken, Martins & Morgan, 1998). Allen (2001) suggested that employees whose employers/supervisors supports their efforts to balance work and life are less likely to experience work-life conflicts and will be more inclined to take up available work-life programs.

In conclusion, employees in the SMEs in Bhutan mainly relied upon informal practices in order to balance the multiple demands in their lives. This system seemed to work well as it was based on trust between employers and employees as well as strong support from co-workers. Formal leave policies existed and were utilized, but few other formal policies seemed to be in place. Even within the formal leave system, informal practices were common.

A potential limitation of the study includes the focus on only a small number of SMEs in only two towns in Bhutan (albeit the largest towns). Future research could investigate how widespread these findings are in a wider range of SMEs, as well as larger private companies and the public sector.

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